Education in Ethics, Critical Thinking, History, and Government

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Human life and government have always been plagued by personal irrationalism, social conflict, crime, authoritarianism, wars, and other such deviations from model human thought and conduct. Is this inevitable? Is there a way out of the morass?

There is no quick fix. Utopian fantasies usually collapse into some form of totalitarianism.

There is another approach, but it is long and difficult. It involves proper education of all or most people in ethics, critical thinking, accurate history, and good government. Realistically, the best one could hope for is that such a reformation in human thought and behavior would occur in some future century. In the meantime, there could be gradual progress. Although historical progress is not preordained, it does sometimes occur. Examples include the abolition of slavery and, in some countries, the legal equality of all human beings, including women and minorities.

The following are my thoughts on how an ethical and rational improvement of the human species might be achieved.

I. EDUCATION IN ETHICS

Neuroscience has demonstrated that the prefrontal cortex of the human brain—the locus of reason, self-control, and decision-making—is not fully developed until age twenty-five or later. Accordingly, it is important that parents and teachers provide good ethical examples and training for the developing human. This includes, at younger ages, habituation in appropriate ethical conduct. Unfortunately, some young people are exposed to ethically bad habituation, either from their families or from their peer groups.[1]

Learning the difference between right thinking and conduct, on the one hand, and wrong thinking and behavior, on the other, takes some time in all children. As a result of

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[1] See Alan E. Johnson, *Reason and Human Ethics* (Philosophia Publications, 2022), 27–29, 65–67. Portions of the present essay are extracted from this book.

the underdevelopment of the child's rational faculties at a young age, this initially occurs by way of command rather than reasoning: Do this, and don't do that! But most children gradually develop at least a partial ability to comprehend and apply ethical reasoning. At that time, the parent or other teacher can begin to explain to the child the reasons for some ethical rules. One standard dictum, expressed in various ways in different cultures, is known as the Golden Rule: "Don't do to others what you don't want them to do to you." Or: "Do to others as you wish them to do unto you." This is a good starting point for ethical instruction, though the Golden Rule may not be applicable to all situations and does not exhaust all ethical understanding.[2]

The principal ethical teachers of very young people are parents and, somewhat later, teachers in institutions such as preschools, public elementary schools, and private elementary schools. Some parents expose their children to religious instruction. Religious institutions often have some moral teachings that are consistent with reasonable ethics. In contrast, other of their commandments are rooted in very ancient texts that address issues not always applicable to a young person's life. Moreover, they also mix theology with morality. As a result of the multiplicity of alleged revelations, it is not possible, rationally, to ascertain which revelation, if any, is true. Moreover, public (tax-supported) schools should not be in the business of theological indoctrination.[3] Accordingly, the following discussion summarizes a basis for ethics that is based on reason alone.[4] Education in such rational ethics could occur in the family or in private schools or other organizations. To the extent it does not oppose religious beliefs of students or their parents, it could also be taught on a commonsense basis in public schools.

Reasonable human ethics has three objectives: (1) to identify and promote the best possible state of being for each individual human being (individual ethics), (2) to identify and promote the best possible relations between individual human beings and other human and nonhuman beings (social ethics), and (3) to identify and promote the best possible political order for human beings (citizen, media, and political ethics).

The touchstone for individual ethics is what facilitates our individual mental and physical well-being, provided we do not violate our ethical duties to others. Good health is, of course, the primary desideratum for physical well-being. Accordingly, activities that facilitate good health are good; activities that are unhealthy—alcoholism, drug addiction,

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[2] See the discussion at Johnson, *Reason and Human Ethics*, 92–93.

[3] See, among many other references, Alan E. Johnson, *The First American Founder: Roger Williams and Freedom of Conscience* (Philosophia Publications, 2015).

[4] The immediately following discussion is a summary of the more detailed explanation and justification of secular, rational ethics in my book *Reason and Human Ethics*. A premise of both *Reason and Human Ethics* (see especially chapters 1 and 2) and this essay is that human reasoning, properly understood, concerns both ends (teleological reasoning) and means (instrumental reasoning). Another premise is that human beings have some free will to be able to formulate ethical principles and comply with them, as established in Alan E. Johnson, *Free Will and Human Life* (Philosophia Publications, 2021).

and so forth—should be avoided. With regard to mental well-being, Plato spoke of the right order of the soul (*psyche*): reason should guide the spirited and desiring parts of the soul. What Plato meant by "soul" is a large question. To avoid theological issues, we can consider the term "mind" to be a synonym for "soul." It is my view that Plato was correct on this precise question, whatever one may think about the many other teachings expressed by the various characters in his famous dialogues. To be human in the true sense means to commit oneself to a rational mode of life—to think rationally and to apply one's reason to the situations with which life confronts us. Such commitment to reason is not always easy. Departures from a life of reason can be seen in such human phenomena as mental laziness, conformism, excessive materialism, intemperance, unjustified anger, and love of power for its own sake. Confucius and Aristotle spoke of an ethical mean (middle way) between excess and deficiency regarding such matters as courage and moderation. These are the kinds of considerations that one should keep in mind with respect to individual ethics.[5]

As discussed above, the Golden Rule is a good starting point for social ethics, though it does not exhaust the possibilities. It is irrational and, accordingly, unethical to be prejudiced against another person on the basis of race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, disability, or similar personal characteristic. It is even more irrational and unethical to discriminate against others on such basis. Friendship and romantic love, to be happy and successful, require that all involved individuals have a high ethical character. Parents have an obligation to educate their children to be rational and ethical. In the workplace, employers should treat their employees with respect, and employees should do "an honest day's work for an honest day's pay," as the saying goes. Finally, no individual should initiate force (assault, murder, theft, robbery, and so forth) or commit fraud against another individual or group of individuals.[6]

Reason is not only important for individual and social ethics. It is also of utmost importance in public discourse, political activism, and voting. The decline of rational thinking in the United States and other countries is inducing transitions from democratic or semi-democratic governments to authoritarian or totalitarian regimes. The starkest evidence of this fact was the violent invasion of the US Capitol building on January 6, 2021, by right-wing extremists, intent on stopping the constitutionally mandated count of the electoral votes by Congress and even including the design of assassinating the vice president, the speaker of the House of Representatives, and the majority leader of the Senate. Furthermore, public media should strive to be as accurate as possible in reporting and commenting on public issues. In 2014, the Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ)

[5] For a more complete discussion, see chapter 3 ("Individual Ethics") of my book *Reason and Human Ethics*.

[6] For details of these and related principles of social ethics, see chapter 4 ("Social Ethics") of my book *Reason and Human Ethics*.

adopted a Code of Ethics that, if followed by all media, would greatly improve public discourse.[7]

Political leadership throughout human history has revealed a wide range of competence and ethics regarding the use of reason and evidence in policy decisions. At one extreme we have the evil of totalitarian and authoritarian dictatorships. At the other, we have the ethical, rational, and evidence-based decision-making exhibited by President John F. Kennedy in the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis. In between are wannabe dictators such as Donald J. Trump, who loves to promote pictures of himself as king or pope and who demonstrates his extreme irrationality and amorality every single day.[8]

Parents and teachers should attempt to educate young people in ethical thinking and behavior in accordance with the principles discussed above, adjusting their instruction to the age of the young person and the propriety of the specific lesson. It may, of course, be impossible and perhaps inappropriate to communicate all of the foregoing in a public school context, and teachers should use their own judgments as to what can or cannot be presented to any particular age group in a public school.

II. EDUCATION IN REASON AND CRITICAL THINKING

Ethics involves both reasonable ends and the rational means by which they may be achieved. As noted above, its ultimate objectives are the best attainable well-being of the individual, beneficial social relationships, and good government. The preceding section distinguished between thought and conduct that are conducive to these ends and mental states and behavior that undermine them.

Good intentions are a necessary but not sufficient condition for the achievement of these objectives. To the extent individuals adopt an ethical orientation, much dysfunction in human affairs could be mitigated. The substitution of good intent for bad would markedly improve the human condition. The desire to wield power for its own sake would fade. Greed would no longer drive excessive materialism or weaken empathy. Prejudice and discrimination would diminish. War would lose its rationale. Crime would disappear. Yet good intentions, though indispensable, do not suffice. The road to hell is sometimes paved with good intentions. We must therefore examine reasoning itself with greater precision.

Education in reasoning and critical thinking would help people understand the difference between correct and incorrect reasoning. Over the millennia, philosophers have

[7] For further details and discussion, see chapter 5 ("Citizen and Media Ethics") of my book *Reason and Human Ethics.*

[8] See chapter 6 ("Political Ethics") of my book *Reason and Human Ethics* and my book *Reason and Human Government* (Philosophia Publications, 2026).

identified several fallacies and other forms of inadequate reasoning. Here are some of them.[9]

The Post Hoc and Correlation Fallacies

One of the most common fallacies is called the post hoc fallacy, from the Latin phrase *post hoc, ergo propter hoc* ("after this, therefore because of this"). This fallacy occurs when one assumes that just because an event (Event 2) followed another event (Event 1), Event 2 was caused by Event 1. But no such conclusion is warranted on the basis of a temporal sequence of events alone. The point is this: A cause must occur before the effect of that cause, but the fact that Event 1 occurs before Event 2 does not necessarily mean that Event 1 caused (or had any contribution to the causation of) Event 2. To conclude that Event 1 caused Event 2, we must also examine factors other than what is called temporal priority (priority in time). The post hoc fallacy is closely related to the correlation fallacy (*cum hoc, ergo propter hoc*: "with this, therefore because of this"). In both cases, the two events may have been caused by a third event; alternatively, the coincidence of Events A and B may be purely a chance phenomenon.

Ambiguity or Equivocation

Another favorite fallacy is ambiguity, also known as equivocation. One manifestation of this fallacy is the implicit modification of the definition of a term in the middle of an argument so that the meaning of the term when used in the premise of the argument is different from the meaning of the term in the conclusion. Philosopher John Stuart Mill explained a typical example:

> Another word which is often turned into an instrument of the fallacy of ambiguity, is Theory. In its most proper acceptation, theory means the completed result of philosophical induction from experience . . . . In another and a more vulgar sense, theory means any mere fiction of the imagination . . . . In this sense only are theory and theorists unsafe guides; but because of this, ridicule or discredit is attempted to be attached to theory in its proper sense, that is, to legitimate generalization, the end and aim of all philosophy; and a conclusion is represented as worthless, just because that has been done which, if done correctly, constitutes the highest worth that a principle for the guidance of practice can possess, namely, to comprehend in a few words the real law on which a phenomenon depends, or some property or relation which is universally true of it.[10]

[9] See chapter 2 of Johnson, *Reason and Human Ethics* for a detailed explanation of these failures of rational thinking. The following discussion includes some excerpts from this discussion.

[10] John Stuart Mill, *A System of Logic, Ratiocinative and Inductive, Being a Connected View of the Principles of Evidence and the Methods of Scientific Investigation*, 8th ed. (New York, 1882), 565.

Circular Reasoning

Circular reasoning is often called "begging the question." This fallacy occurs when one attempts to prove a premise by using that very premise (often in disguise) in the course of the argument. For example, one could imagine a fictitious religion (call it "Truth") that has a holy book said to be based on revelation from certain gods (call them the Furies). In response to a question whether one should believe in the existence of the Furies, the defender of the religion says: "Because the holy book says so."

Ad Hominem Arguments

This fallacy substitutes a personal attack on a person for rational argument. It may be perfectly true that a person is a scoundrel. That does not necessarily make that person's arguments untrue. To test those arguments, one must use reason, logic, and evidence, not emotional dislike of the source.

Ad Populum Arguments

This form of irrational thinking assumes that just because many people think something to be true, that thing must be true. Throughout human history, popular opinion has often been wrong about many things. Accordingly, it is fallacious to base an argument on the numbers of people who believe it. Truth is not adjudicated by a popularity poll.

Diversion; Straw Person

The fallacy of diversion is one of the most cherished mental tricks of lawyers and politicians. One of its most frequent manifestations is the "straw person" argument (formerly known as the "straw man" argument). This clever technique mischaracterizes another's position on an issue and then refutes the mischaracterized position. Another form of diversion is to ignore the other's argument and, instead, focus on irrelevant points, usually with a heavy emotional emphasis.

False Analogy

Analogies are sometimes useful as heuristic or educational devices to help hearers or readers understand a point that a speaker or writer is attempting to communicate. However, analogies can be problematic when they are used as alleged proof of an argument. Essentially, analogies can legitimately be used as proof of an argument only when the two alleged comparables share all the same relevant characteristics.

False Equivalence

The fallacy of false equivalence is related to the fallacy of faulty analogy. It is similar to what is sometimes called the fallacy of "moral equivalence" and "whataboutism." This tactic is often used in political arguments. If Politician A alleges that Politician B did a bad act, Politician B turns around and says Politician A also committed a bad act. This is a false equivalence when the two acts are not equal in their ethical or consequential significance.

Appeal to Authority

The fallacy of appeal to authority occurs when people are wrongly convinced of a certain view because it is uttered by an authority they trust. Since it is impossible to be an expert on everything, we all rely on the expertise of others in many routine areas of life. When, however, the question is very important—for example, in politics or religion—we should either think for ourselves or examine very carefully the basis for our trust in others.

Reliance on authority is historically connected with religion. Chapter 1 of my book *Reason and Human Ethics* lists many of the various incompatible claims to revelation, and the appendix to that book elaborates some of the theological and violent conflicts among the claims to revelation. Historically, most Christian Protestants in the United States accepted the notion that revelation ceased with the accounts in the Christian New Testament. Nevertheless, some contemporary self-styled prophets of evangelical or charismatic Protestantism have claimed to receive revelation directly from God. During the 2010s and especially during the election controversies surrounding President Donald J. Trump's defeat in the 2020 presidential election, many of these "prophets" asserted that God had told them that God had appointed Trump—whose reputation for immorality, misogyny, and racism long preceded his rise to the presidency in January 2017—to be the authoritarian ruler of the United States and that God's will superseded any election or other laws to the contrary. Trump's loss in the 2020 election—confirmed by scores of judicial decisions, recounts, audits, and investigations[11]—was seen as a Satanic illusion, and the prophets (many of whom were praised by Trump himself) said that God would keep Trump in the presidency. This view was related to the QAnon belief that Trump would enlist the military to take over the United States Government by force and proceed to execute thousands of liberal Democrats who were accused (totally without evidence) of pedophilia and other sins. An autocratic theocracy would replace the United States democratic republic. The Constitution and laws of the United States would be trashed in the name of God. All of this went hand-in-hand with Trump's evidence-free mantra that the Democrats had stolen the 2020 election and that he had won by a massive landslide. People influenced by these conspiracy theories staged a violent attack on the US Capitol building on January 6, 2021, intending to stop the constitutionally mandated count by Congress of the Electoral College votes and looking to hang Vice President Mike Pence and otherwise execute Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi and Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer. This assault resulted in death and injuries to many defending police officers. It also resulted in the delay, by several hours, of the congressional count of the Electoral College votes.[12]

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[11] See the massive evidence cited and discussed in Chapter 5 of Alan E. Johnson, *The Electoral College" Failures of Original Intent and Proposed Constitutional and Statutory Changes for Direct Popular Vote*, 2nd ed. (Philosophia Publications, 2021).

[12] See Matthew D. Taylor, *The Violent Take It by Force: The Christian Movement That Is Threatening Our Democracy* (Broadleaf Books, 2024); Johnson, *The Electoral College*, 2nd ed., chap. 5; Matthew Rowley, "Prophetic Populism and the Violent Rejection of Biden's Election: Mapping the Theology of the Capitol Insurrection," *International Journal of Religion* 12, no. 2 (December 2021): 145–164,

This episode in American history illustrates quite clearly the extreme danger of the fallacy of appeal to authority. The "prophets" adduced no objective evidence to support their claims to revelation (indeed, no such evidence could ever exist). None of the many Trumpian lawsuits and investigations established any irregularities in the election that, if corrected, would have resulted in Trump's reelection. Trump's constant and continuing (to the time of this writing) claim that the election was stolen was a typical Big Lie perpetrated by an authoritarian or would-be authoritarian leader—a common tactic of such dictators as Stalin, Hitler, Putin, and many other autocrats.

Education in reasoning and critical thinking might have led many of those who eventually participated in the violent January 6, 2021 rebellion to think carefully about what they were planning to do and ask themselves what evidence supported their bizarre notions. Since only blind faith in Trump and his supporting cast of self-styled "prophets" motivated these actors, most of them, if properly educated, might have decided not to participate in such criminal activity.

Jumping to Conclusions/Hasty Generalization

A common inductive fallacy, which we all have likely committed at one time or another, is the fallacy of jumping to conclusions. The fallacy of hasty generalization is one form of jumping to conclusions. People often jump to conclusions because they do not wish to take the time to consider alternative possibilities. Cognitive psychologist and neuroscientist Daniel J. Levitin gives an example how one can erroneously jump to a conclusion in everyday life: "When evaluating a claim or argument, ask yourself if there is another reason—other than the one offered—that could account for the facts or observations that have been reported. There are always alternative explanations; our job is to weigh them against the one(s) offered and determine whether the person drawing the conclusion has drawn the most obvious or likely one."[13]

False Dichotomy or False Dilemma

Another common error is the fallacy of false dichotomy or false dilemma, which is often committed by politicians and even scholars. The essence of this fallacy is that it implicitly or explicitly assumes that there are only two alternative explanations of something, ignoring the possibility that a third explanation is the legitimate one.

What Is Critical Thinking?

Understanding and avoiding fallacies is a part of critical thinking. But critical thinking itself is a broader endeavor. It is a habit of mind in which one examines one's own thinking

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https://www.academia.edu/67060884/Prophetic_Populism_and_the_Violent_Rejection_of_Joe_Bidens_Election_Mapping_the_Theology_of_the_Capitol_Insurrection; Sarah Posner, *Unholy*: *How Christian Nationalists Powered the Trump Presidency, and the Devastating Legacy They Left Behind* (Random House, 2021), Kindle.

[13] Daniel J. Levitin, *A Field Guide to Lies: Critical Thinking with Statistics and the Scientific Method* (Dutton, 2016), 152.

as well as the statements of others in an attempt to ascertain whether specific propositions are consistent with reason and evidence. It involves, when appropriate, a careful appraisal of the reliability of the evidence allegedly supporting a particular statement.

Critical thinking does *not* mean that one *criticizes everything*. One should not start with the premise of sophomoric skepticism that everything is false and nothing is true. Critical thinking does not mean automatically taking an adversarial posture to every proposition or to the person espousing the proposition. Rather, a person should evaluate each argument with a properly skeptical attitude and question whether the assertions formulated by oneself or others are consistent with reason and evidence.

We now turn to a consideration of some of the principles and applications of critical thinking.

Principle of (Non)contradiction

The principle of contradiction (often now called the principle or law of noncontradiction) states that the same thing cannot be and not be at the same time and in the same respect. With regard to individual, social, and political matters, this is a foundational axiom of critical thinking.[14]

A contradiction is not the same thing as a paradox. A paradox appears on the surface to be a contradiction, but it is not a contradiction, because it involves a fact, not immediately evident, that accounts for the true reality behind the paradox. Once we understand the previously unknown fact, the matter no longer involves an apparent contradiction.

We do not know, and may never know, whether some of the apparent contradictions of physics and metaphysics (for example, the imponderables of quantum entanglement, a first cause, the beginning of time, and the infinity of space) are true contradictions or whether they are mere paradoxes. There may be a "logic," so to speak, that is currently or forever inaccessible to the human mind. Such difficulties do not apply, however, to normal human conduct. When, for example, a politician routinely makes contradictory statements, we should dismiss all of them unless we can independently verify that one of them is true.

What's the Source?

In evaluating a primary or secondary source, the first thing you should consider is whether the source is possibly biased. For example, is the source a well-known advocate for left-wing or right-wing causes? Is the source a careful historian or scientist or is it a hack—perhaps a paid hack—for a particular ideological view? Knowing such facts about the source need not deter you from considering it, but you thereby become alert for possible omissions or biases in the source's treatment of factual or interpretive matters. Caveat emptor!

[14] For a discussion of an apparent (but not ultimately true) contradiction between ethics and politics, see Johnson, *Reason and Human Government*, chap. 1 and pp. 178–79.

By the way, such care does not make you guilty of committing the ad hominem fallacy. The purpose of such source evaluation is to keep you on the lookout for possible problems, not for you to make a snap judgment.

Quotes out of Context

Many writers and speakers quote others out of context. If the quotation is important, look for the original place in which it was made, and consider the entire context of the remark.

Anecdotal Evidence: The Good and the Bad

Sometimes a claim is supported by anecdotal evidence. Statistical evidence would seem to be more reliable; however, as discussed below, statistical evidence can be and often is misused. Additionally, statistical evidence is not always available. Anecdotal evidence has its benefits but should not be mistaken for a more thorough approach. Careful consideration of anecdotal as well as statistical evidence is part of the endeavor to avoid hasty generalization.

Critical Thinking About Statistics

Statistics are often misused by advertisers, journalists, politicians, and others. Sometimes the trickery is deliberate; on other occasions, it is inadvertent or negligent.

One of the clearest discussions of statistical deception is in part 1 of Daniel J. Levitin's book *A Field Guide to Lies: Critical Thinking with Statistics and the Scientific Method*. Levitin is a cognitive psychologist and neuroscientist. His book is one of many that discuss such matters in depth. Elaboration of these principles is beyond the scope of the present paper; the interested reader can consult books and studies that specifically focus on these issues.

Confirmation Bias

Humans often look for information that supports their preexisting views and disregard contrary data or evidence. Critical thinking demands that we set aside confirmation bias and, instead, consider all relevant facts and arguments that pass a certain threshold of plausibility. Of course, it is not necessary to waste time on arguments that are ridiculous on their face (for example, the QAnon assertion that liberals are pedophiles who eat human children), except for the purpose, if required by the occasion, of refuting it.

Conspiracies—Actual, Probable, Possible, and Fictional[15]

Historians have established the existence of some actual conspiracies throughout history. No dispute about the reality of such historical facts exists among serious scholars.

Some conspiracy theories have ample supporting evidence but are not yet universally accepted. These are "probable" or "possible" conspiracies, depending on the quantity and quality of evidence supporting them. For example, scholars, lawyers, journalists, other

[15] This subsection is a condensation of the discussion on pages 60–62 of Johnson, *Reason and Human Ethics*. The endnotes to that discussion cite the sources upon which the text relies.

researchers, and witnesses have adduced substantial and even judicially admissible evidence that the 1964 Warren Commission's official version of the John F. Kennedy assassination—that Lee Harvey Oswald was the sole shooter and no conspiracy existed—is incorrect and that there was, in reality, a successful conspiracy of several (perhaps many) actors, inside and outside of the United States Government, who were involved in the planning, execution, and/or coverup of the assassination. In 1979, the US House of Representatives Select Committee on Assassinations concluded there was "a high probability that two gunmen fired at President John F. Kennedy" and that "President John F. Kennedy was probably assassinated as a result of a conspiracy." In contrast, other analysts have attempted to debunk any and all such JFK assassination conspiracy theories. In my view, it is probable (based on the overwhelming evidence cited in the endnote references to pages 60–62 of *Reason and Human Ethics*) that a conspiracy to assassinate Kennedy did exist and that such conspiracy involved US governmental officials as well as nongovernmental actors.

For every actual, probable, or possible conspiracy, there are countless conspiracy theories that are totally baseless. Recent examples of conspiracy theories that lack any supporting evidence but have rather been made up out of whole cloth include various false allegations about COVID vaccines, the Big Lie that the 2020 presidential election was stolen from Donald Trump, and the related psychotic delusions of the QAnon fantasy world.

EDUCATION IN RATIONAL AND CRITICAL THINKING

Should every high school student take a course on reason and critical thinking along the lines set forth above? Such a course would, I believe, strengthen rational habits of mind and help counteract the irrationalism and violent extremism that now afflict public life. Political resistance in a public school setting is possible; there are, after all, interests that benefit from the spread of irrationality. I leave it to administrative and teaching personnel to determine whether and how such a course could become an essential part of high school education. Some elements of such a course might also be used, carefully and cautiously, at the elementary and middle school levels.

III. EDUCATION IN HISTORY AND GOVERNMENT

History education in American elementary and secondary schools during the twentieth century mostly involved, at least for testing purposes, the memorization of historical dates. Consequently, generations of students found history to be boring, tedious, and irrelevant. Only at the college and postgraduate levels did the study of history become a fascinating subject for those who were interested in broader historical themes and how they might or might not be relevant to current issues.

However, the education departments of many colleges and universities became dominated by the latest fads in educational theory. This reached a kind of peak in recent

decades with the growing influence of postmodernist thinking, including but not limited to critical race theory, in higher education generally.[16]

The far right, including the MAGA movement and certain state governments, reacted furiously, demanding that all elementary and secondary textbooks be purged of anything that would make a White student uncomfortable. They insisted that history texts be wholly hagiographic, not dwelling on—or even mentioning—the more sordid developments in American history. This extreme right-wing reaction to an extreme left-wing phenomenon threatened to distort history even further by ignoring real injustices in American history, including slavery, mistreatment of Indigenous people, "Manifest Destiny" imperialism, gender discrimination, and discrimination against minority groups.[17]

In contrast to the censorship of either left or right, American and world history should be taught on the basis of objective facts. History reveals both positive and negative factual developments. Students should be exposed to both.

Accurate teaching about government and civics is also important. The present discussion is oriented toward classrooms in the United States. Teachers in other countries can adapt the following thoughts, as appropriate, to their respective situations.

My book *Reason and Human Government* may be consulted–perhaps as a kind of teacher's guide—for a course in US government.[18]

The first question is whether government is necessary. Various forms of anarchism argue that advanced societies such as the United States do not even need government. This might be an interesting question for classroom discussion; however, chapter 1 of *Reason and Human Government* concluded that anarchism is not possible in advanced societies—at least absent a preceding ethical and rational reformation of human thought and conduct.

Students should study the US Declaration of Independence. There are different interpretations of the Declaration, and the teacher may or may not wish to discuss such interpretations. The same applies to the US Constitution and the amendments thereto. Students should consider the meaning of individual rights (chapter 2) and the legitimate affirmative powers of government (chapter 3). These questions are controversial, and students may have differing views about them. They should understand the meaning of constitutional rights, the constitutional separation of powers among the three branches of

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[16] See, for example, the article "Why I Quit the Tenure Track: The Insufferable Hypocrisy of Elite Academia" in the September 2026 issue of *The Atlantic* by a Black professor, Tyler Austin Harper, who resigned his tenure-track position at Bates College when he could no longer stand the inanity of academic wokeism: https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/2026/09/elite-academia-leadership-hypocrisy/687969/?utm_source=copy-link&utm_medium=social&utm_campaign=share (gift article).

[17] See David French, "There Is a Sickness Worse Than Wokeness," *New York Times*, August 27, 2026, https://www.nytimes.com/2026/08/27/opinion/woke-right-trump-free-speech.html.

[18] Johnson, *Reason and Human Government* (2026). The parenthetical information in the following text refers to chapters or page numbers in that book.

government (legislative, executive, and judicial), the constitutional checks and balances between and within the branches, and the divisions of powers between the federal, state, and local governments.

It is also very important that students learn about the different forms of government (chapter 4). The United States is a democratic republic with a unique constitutional history (pages 80–88). Some other countries, for example, the United Kingdom, have a parliamentary democracy (pages 88-89). Ancient Athens, for a time, had a direct democracy, and students should understand the differences between a direct democracy and constitutional, representative democracies such as the United States (pages 89–91). Students should also learn about the European Union and its history (page 89).

Students should also acquire knowledge about authoritarian and totalitarian governments—including the regimes of Joseph Stalin, Benito Mussolini, Adolf Hitler, Mao Zedong, and post–World War II North Korea, with their associated ideologies of Communism, fascism, and Nazism. They should also be familiar with the many absolute monarchies and other authoritarian governments throughout human history, up to the contemporary autocratic governments of Vladimir Putin and others around the world. In addition, they should learn about the theocracies of sixteenth-century Geneva, seventeenth-century Massachusetts Bay, and present-day Iran and Saudi Arabia. Such knowledge should immunize them from authoritarian and theocratic demagoguery.[19]

Finally, students should think about what constitutes good and bad political leadership.[20]

All such knowledge of American and world history and government would help immensely in avoiding the degeneration of constitutional democracy in the United States and elsewhere into some form of authoritarianism or theocracy. One can only assume that the people who violently attacked the US Capitol building (and its defending police officers) on January 6, 2021, lacked such understanding.

IV. CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Ethics includes proper reasoning about both ends and means.[21] Humankind will not be free of such evils as wars, social conflict, crime, and authoritarianism unless and until it becomes properly educated in reasonable individual, social, and political ethics. Such

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[19] See Johnson, *Reason and Human Ethics*, 140–56; Johnson, *Reason and Human Government*, 95–97, 182–217; Johnson, *The First American Founder: Roger Williams and Freedom of Conscience*.

[20] See chapter 5 ("Political Leadership in the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis") and the appendix ("The Historical Background of the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis") of Johnson, *Reason and Human Government*; see also Johnson, *Reason and Human Ethics*, chap. 6.

[21] See the discussion in Alan E. Johnson, "The Rational Basis of Human Ethics" at https://www.academia.edu/169822658/The_Rational_Basis_of_Human_Ethics_edited_August_20_2026_ and https://archive.org/details/rational-basis-of-human-ethics-2026-08-20.

education can occur in families, social organizations, formal schooling, and personal study and reflection. It will not happen overnight, and it may never happen. Over the course of decades and centuries, however, such education may gradually improve the human condition. The jury is still out. In the meantime, let's do everything reasonably and ethically possible to achieve that objective.

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